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Matters of Grave Import

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Abstract

Discusses two of Hans Christian Andersen’s stories, and considers their possible influence on Lewis’s Narnian stories.

Additional Keywords

Andersen, Hans Christian—Influence on C.S. Lewis; Andersen, Hans Christian. “The Marsh King’s Daughter”; Andersen, Hans Christian. “The Snow Queen”; Linda Leach

MATTERS OF GRAVE IMPORT

GRACIA FAY ELLWOOD

ANDERSEN: JOY, SORROW AND THE JOKE PROPER

"Just then they noticed some strange looking things in the sky. At first they looked like little black dots. Then they noticed that the black things were coming toward them. As the things flew closer they could not recognize what they were. They were weird looking creatures, and they had never seen anything like them before. Then, when they got very close, they saw that they looked like monkeys."

The true hero is the Wizard-Lizard who, oddly, displays no magical powers at all. The illustrator shows a bespectacled classical philosopher and by the text he is clearly an analyst, leading his clients with gentle Socratic questions. "He never gave simple solutions." It seems an odd taboo; we cry like the crew of the *Pinafore*. "What, never?" After all, some backaches are cured by just changing shoes.

There is no real chance that Gardner will delight or thrill the young as Baum has; there is a real danger of his misleading them. It is not just that his Analyst-Wizard-Lizard is never wrong; a man will boost his own profession. But there lies at the heart of this didactic little book a singularly lethal untruth, that has, in my experience, brought pain and frustration to my fellow creatures.

"The best thing for you," the Lizard counsels Dorothy, "is to talk to the sheriff yourself and see if you can convince him to change his order" (that given to Miss Gulch for the confiscation of Toto). It works.

"You're right," the sheriff said. "I really didn't hear your side of the story and I should have before giving her that order. I'm sorry."

Of course children should be taught to be reasonable. But to teach them that they can count on the world to respond reasonably is abominably wicked. They can count on no such thing.

In a passage that occupies four pages, Dr. Gardner's Dorothy is led through a verse by verse recantation of the lyrics of "Over the Rainbow". But then he replaces the lemon-drop MGM never-land with the rationalist Utopia of the Enlightenment, a Utopia no less unreal for being deadly earnest in conception.

"She never had any more trouble with Miss Gulch. She and Toto stayed away from her high fence and so never gave her a reason to complain." Lord above, has Dr. Gardner really never met Miss Gulch? The Miss Gulches of the world require no reasons to complain.

Dr. Gardner is invited to attend an Oz convention. I've been to three and find the people generally cheerful, well-adjusted, not much wracked by divorce, drugs, drink or break-downs, economically functional, perhaps somewhat gentler than the norm. I contrast the unhappiness I have known among people who grew up expecting life to be fair. There is much to be said for books that tell children, "Life is unexpected".

But the issue here is larger than a slur upon Oz fandom. The psychologist has a legitimate interest in fantasy, as in anything else that enters the mind. But that interest should be expressed in ways that do not demean both the psychologist and the materials. I dare say a psychologist might write good fantasy - no examples spring to mind - but he will do so by disciplining the didactic temptation and by subordinating himself to his language and to his tale. As for *The Wizard of Oz*, why fix what isn't broken?



Recently the Mydgard branch discussed Hans Christian Andersen's two novellas *The Snow Queen* and *The Marsh King's Daughter*. The sense of the meeting was that here are treasures that need to be dusted off and cherished anew. This column will therefore be a branch discussion report, so to speak. As it were.

Most of us had not read *The Snow Queen* for years, and had not heard of the other story at all before this; we were surprised by the density of the material. One luminous image after another appeared, more or less integrated in the story, exemplifying many basic motifs of Romance. Paradisal childhood innocence, capture-and-rescue, snow and ice as symbols of dehumanization, talking flowers and animals, the Wise Old Woman in her womblike novel, the talisman, the warm, life-renewing tear, the ailing king and his languishing land, the Quest for the Grail-like marvelous object, the shapeshifting protagonist, the seizure of the maiden by the King of the Underworld, the dual-natured child of light and darkness, the life-giving sacrifice of the innocent, the return of the dead, the miraculous recovery of the king, the moment in paradise that takes up many decades on earth.

Another feature of Andersen that we had largely forgotten was his humor. Having long associated him with the sufferings of the ugly duckling, the little match girl, the little mermaid and others, we were surprised that these matters of grave import were often so cavalierly treated. *The Marsh King's Daughter* is told largely from the point of view of a pair of married storks, who discuss the ordeals and joys of the human protagonists amidst petty domestic carping and appreciative comments about mouth-watering Nile frogs.

One element in *The Snow Queen* that is bound to interest Lewis enthusiasts is of course its influence on the Narnian tales. The snow queen found her way nearly intact into *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*, even to the sleigh, the reindeer, and the seduction and imprisonment of the foolish little boy. The submerged sexual motif is more noticeable in Andersen's story, where Kay is kissed by the Snow Queen, and although he is described as a child, he is confused not long afterwards with the young man who courts (and presumably marries) the clever Princess.

Andersen's icy queen differs from Lewis' in that the former is identified with rationality. As Kay is carried off in her sleigh he tries to pray, but finds that all he can remember is the multiplication tables. Later, in her arctic palace, she sets him to working out a cerebral puzzle. She is almost impersonal--she destroys by virtue of what she is, in contrast to Jadis, who is gratuitously cruel and a betrayer. And correspondingly, she is not destroyed at the climax; she is simply absent when Gerda comes for Kay. Rationality cannot be slain.

Lewis uses the image of cold and snow again in *The Silver Chair*, a quest to the North, and a sinister female figure who abducts a young man. He is saved by a young heroine, though the tone is rather different in that Jill shares the honors with Eustace and Puddleglum.

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A WINTER'S TALE

The cold queen of Narnia
Lies in her cold bed
River ice her coverlet
Snow beneath her head

White hands open
Dark eyes wide
Seeing through the window
The white hillside

Watching in the moonlight
Waiting for a sound
Hard hoofs tapping
On the frozen ground

Shield arms blazoning
Burnished bright his mail
Brave knight errant
Seeks the Holy Grail

His eyes are blue sky
Glowing gold his hair
Warm young wanderer
Surely thou art fair

Mailed feet ringing
In the silent hall
Pale tapers leaping
Shadows on the wall

Silver is her girdle
Milk-white her breast
Come lie with me
I will give you rest

Sapphire silver chalice
Purple poppy wine
Staining his cold lips
Now you are mine

In a high white tower
Where no-one wakes
Ice blue his stare
His stone heart breaks

Soft snowflakes fall
Slow dream of years
Where streams run free
Sweet Lion's tears

Where sunbeams break
Dark trance of death

Warm breezes blow
Sweet Lion's breath

The cold queen of Narnia
Lies down alone
Blind are her dark eyes
Empty her throne

Mark Allaby

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In contrast to most romances, and quite un-self-consciously, the author has made the central characters in these stories female. The Quest hero is a heroine who sets out into the wide world to save someone she loves. Gerda encounters one female figure after another, vivid and highly interesting, all of whom hinder or help her in various ways until she succeeds in rescuing Kay. In *The Marsh King's Daughter*, the Egyptian princess and her daughter with whom she shares the quest do encounter male figures to be reckoned with, principally the Marsh King, who carries off the princess, and the young priest, whom the daughter rescues and who later brings about her transformation through his sacrifice. Nonetheless it is the heroines who are the focus of attention, and who give new life to the king.

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